

Seniors Will Get Needed Medicines Under Democratic Proposal

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Seniors Will Get Needed Medicines Under Democratic Proposal

Washington, DC

— Today House Democrats announced legislation to provide emergency relief to senior citizens and people with disabilities who are having trouble navigating the new Medicare prescription drug program.

The Medicare Prescription Emergency Guarantee Act:

- Ensures that all seniors and people with disabilities whose plan enrollment cannot be verified at the pharmacy receive the medications they need at an affordable price.

- Ensures no senior or person with disabilities hears the words, "I'm sorry, your drug is not covered by the plan" and guarantees that they will receive their medicine at an affordable price until they can complete an appeal.

- Prohibits private plans from removing needed medications from their formulary except during the open enrollment period. No more "bait and switch."

- Requires Medicare, not beneficiaries, to pay the pharmacies, recoup payments from the private plans and reimburse anyone, including States,

that made payments on behalf of a beneficiary.

A summary of the legislation is attached.

"Seniors and people with disabilities should not be penalized because of the failures of President Bush's Administration," said John D. Dingell (D-MI), Ranking Member of the Committee on Energy and Commerce. "We are working to eliminate many of the problems beneficiaries are now experiencing by putting the drug benefit in Medicare where it belongs, but in the interim we need to protect their access to medicines."

"A culture of corruption between congressional Republicans and drug company lobbyists produced the confusing, special interest driven Medicare prescription drug bill that put seniors last," said Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA). "This bill is an emergency measure to guarantee that seniors and people with disabilities never leave the pharmacy without the prescription drugs they need."

"We're going to fix the prescription drug plan because the status quo is not working for millions of Medicare beneficiaries," said Pete Stark (D-CA), Ranking Member of the Committee on Ways and Means Health Subcommittee. "Ultimately, however, we need to simplify the entire system by putting the benefit in Medicare where it belongs. The complexity and deliberate confusion plaguing the Medicare drug program are just symptoms of the reckless ideology driving the Bush Administration's healthcare policies. This is but a preview of their vision for the entire healthcare system. Consider yourself forewarned."

"If the Republican Congress had been as concerned with the welfare of Medicare beneficiaries as it was with protecting the interests of the drug companies and insurance companies that are their big contributors we would have seen a very different drug program," said Henry A. Waxman (D-CA), Ranking Member of the Committee on Government Reform. "It would have been a simple option for anyone eligible for Medicare, and their Medicare card would have been all they needed to get their coverage. Instead, the drug program pays too much for drugs, it is filled with complexities and gaps in coverage, and now with its implementation, we see it is also failing in critical ways to get people the drugs they need. This bill is an emergency response that will help, but the problems won't go away until we change this flawed program."

"The time has come for the Administration to acknowledge the program's serious flaws, and to work with us to address them," said Charles B. Rangel (D-NY), Ranking Member of the Committee on Ways and Means. "We didn't create this mess, but we will be here to clean it up."

"The Republican leadership in Congress and the Bush Administration created this monster. The least they can do is help tame it," said Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Ranking Member of the Committee on Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee.

While the legislation is being introduced by Democratic members, Republican co-sponsorship is welcome and encouraged. Senior citizens and Americans with disabilities are experiencing the same problems across the country, regardless of political party or representation.

House Democrats have introduced other legislation to address glaring flaws in the Part D program, including a bill (H.R. 752) by Rep. Marion Berry (D-AR), to require that Medicare offer a national plan and negotiate in that plan for lower prices, and a bill (H.R. 3861) by Rep. Pete Stark to extend the deadline for the initial enrollment period and waive late enrollment penalties for the first year of the program.

Senators Evan Bayh (D-IN) and Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) will introduce a companion bill to the Medicare Prescription Emergency Guarantee Act this week in the Senate.